A Discussion of Contemporary Issues Facing African Americans

African Americans face current challenges that impact their group status and advancement within the United States. These challenges involve employment, education, family, health, race relations, criminal justice, economic development, and the role of the African American church. The National Urban League, U.S. Census Bureau, Center for Disease Control (CDC) and other organizations have researched these areas.

This report relies primarily on two publications by the National Urban League: (1) *The State of Black America 2001* and (2) *The State of Black America 2000. The State of Black America 2001* contains a study of 800 African American households where respondents state that racial discrimination, employment or unemployment, education, unity, and crime are five of the most important problems facing them (Stafford, 2001). Some of these problems, along with challenges identified by other sources, are discussed here. For the sake of efficiency, they are discussed in the following sections: (1) race matters: employment and the legal system, (2) wealth and business development, and (3) family and church. Health is discussed separately and is based on reports from the CDC and the Multicultural Clearinghouse. Solutions that have been offered to address these issues are included.

Race Matters: Employment and the Legal System

During the last quarter of the 20th Century, African Americans were employed at greater rates and held more positions in managerial and professional occupations than at any other period in the history of the United States. For example, their entry into managerial and professional occupations increased from 13.7 percent in 1982 to 21.5 percent in 1999 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000). The unemployment rate among African Americans, however, remained more than twice that of whites from 1972 through 1999 (Tidwell, 2000). In 1999, for example, the unemployment rate was 8.2 for African Americans and 3.6 for whites.

Although labor force participation improved for African Americans, their complaints of racial discrimination on the job were higher than any other group. The average number of complaints for this group is 28,000 per year (Stafford, 2001, p. 26). Sixty-three percent of the 800 African-American households surveyed believe that they are treated unfairly regardless of their job status. In particular, respondents felt that they are paid less than whites and that their advancement on the job is limited because of their race. This belief is supported, in part, by U.S. Census data that show African Americans earn 30 percent less than non-Hispanic whites (Tidwell, 2000).

The legal system (law enforcement and criminal justice) is considered by many biased against African Americans. Racial profiling and incarceration rates among African Americans are significantly higher than other groups. In recent years, media attention has

focused on the nationwide practice of racial profiling by law enforcement agencies. This practice involves discriminately stopping and searching African American drivers. For example, on an interstate highway in Maryland, 17 percent of drivers were African Americans, yet they made up for 77 percent of drivers who were stopped and searched (Harris, 2000, p. 262). The Governor of New Jersey admitted that police officers in his state were practicing intentional racial profiling (Harris, 2000, p.262). African Americans at all socio-economic levels report that they have experienced this problem.

Crime prevention is a concern for the overwhelming majority of law abiding African Americans. There are significant racial disparities, however, in the administration of criminal justice. Although African Americans represent 13 percent of all drug users in the U.S., they make up 38 percent of arrestees for drug offensives (Harris, 2000). Fifty percent of the two million people incarcerated in the U.S. prisons are African American men and women (Marable, 2000, p.1). African American juveniles are six times more likely to be convicted and sent to prison for the same crimes committed by white youth offenders who are given lesser sentences (Marable, p. 3-4).

Wealth and Business Development

Wealth is calculated as the difference between assets and liabilities. With respect to assets, it often involves investment in stocks and mutual funds. More than 50 percent of all Americans own stocks according to the Federal Reserve Board and Securities Industry Association; however, only 36 percent of African Americans reported having such investments among those surveyed by the National Urban League (Stafford, 2001, p. 38). Thirty-three percent of these respondents also reported debts in excess of $5,000. This means that African Americans are not participating in wealth generating activities at the national average level.

African American business ownership increased from 424,000 to 621,000 from 1987 to 1992 (Tidwell, 2000). This represents a 32 percent growth rate compared to 26 percent for other groups. African American business ownership is not in proportion to their representation in the population, however. African Americans own four percent of the total businesses in the U.S., while representing 13 percent of the U.S. population. The revenues of these businesses constitute one percent of the total receipts for U.S. companies. For example, the receipts of African American businesses averaged $52,000 per year compared to $193,000 per year for all U.S. firms from 1987 to 1992 (Tidwell, 2000).

Although African Americans have a powerful consumer spending base of more than half a trillion dollars ($533 billion), they shop at few African American owned businesses. They have lost ground to other ethnic minorities who own retail establishments in residential communities. In 1997, Hispanic and Asian owned businesses receipts were $183 billion and $275 billion, respectively, while African American owned business receipts were only $59.3 billion (Walker, 2000). Many of the

Hispanic and Asian owned establishments rely heavily on African American retail spending (Walker, 2000).

To address wealth and business ownership challenges, it is recommended that African Americans seek investment opportunities in the stock market and set up businesses that offer competitive services and products targeted at their retail-consumer market (Tidwell, 2000). These initiatives will increase the financial status of African Americans and, in turn, create greater stability for the U.S. economy.

Family and the Role of the African American Church

The African American family has sustained its members through extended family and community relationships from slavery up to the present. African Americans feel that the family is the most important institution for improving their status within the U.S. (Stafford, 2001, p. 37). Twenty-five percent of African American children are at risk, however, from challenges to the family that include the absence of one or both parents, poverty, welfare dependency, and lack of education of parents. These problems are addressed effectively through family resiliency (Thompson and Bulter, 2001, p.228). Resilient families are characterized by (1) having a positive outlook on life, (2) having a mission and vision for the future, (3) accepting responsibility and taking risks (4) monitoring and controlling emotions, and (5) maintaining a sense of humor (Thompson and Bulter, 2001).

African Americans feel that their churches are the second most important resource for their development (Stafford, 2001). These churches have played a central role in securing political positions and protesting for civil rights for African Americans from Reconstruction (late 1860's) up to present times (Smith and Tucker-Worgs, 2000). The African American church came under attack during 1992 to 1995. Sixty-two churches were burned in the South, and nine where burned in Northwest states (Averill, 1996). White supremacists groups where suspected primarily; however, law enforcement personnel in Southern states investigated African American congregation members for these crimes (1996).

In recent years, several African American churches have transformed into mega-structures with 7,000 +members that consist of multiracial congregations (Smith and Tucker-Worgs, 2000). These churches have expanded services to include education, fitness, day care, and financial counseling. Some African American members of these churches are skeptical of their leaders ability to maintain traditional commitment to African American community issues.

The family and church are significant in the development of African Americans. It is important that these institutions receive continued support within the family, from community members, and from society at large.

Health Issues

The CDC reports that the " . . . impact of HIV and AIDS in the African American community has been devastating" (2002). There have been a total of 733,347 AIDS cases reported through 1999, and 272,881 of these cases are individuals who are African American (CDC 2002). This means that 37 percent of all AIDS cases reported in the U.S. occurred among African Americans. This is significantly disproportionate in terms of their 13 percent representation in the U.S. population. African American gay men are the largest group diagnosed with HIV (37%), and intravenous substance abusers (34%) are the second highest group. Ironically, 72 percent of respondents surveyed by the National Urban League did not express concern about contracting the disease (Stafford, 2001, p.41). There have been prevention efforts by public sector organizations (CDC, 2002) and by African American leaders who developed a disease-fighting agenda in June 2001 (Stafford, 2001, p.39).

Hypertension, lupus, sickle cell, diabetes, and prostate cancer are other diseases that affect African Americans disproportionately compared to other ethnic groups (CDC 2000). Adolescent pregnancy among this group is also a serious concern. For more information regarding health issues of African Americans visit the Multicultural Clearinghouse's web site.

Conclusion

Given that race is a compelling matter in American society—one that can divide or unify citizens—it seems urgent that enlightened approaches are adopted in addressing it. Cornel West, famed author and professor at Harvard University, recommends that the Americans must dispense with the perspective of viewing the problems of African Americans as those of a separate ethnic group. Instead, they should see them as part of the American family that need the care and support of all citizens and organizations in making a more perfect Union. West asserts that Americans have to believe that they are a valuable resource and can solve race and economic problems (1993, p. 6). He says that grass roots leadership and the organization of town hall communities (the public square) can form a large-scale public intervention to ensure that all have access to social goods—food, housing, health care, child care, and jobs (1993, p.7). The organization of the public square can enlist the support of support of government, business, and labor (1993, p. 7). In essence, West argues the problems facing ethnic groups can be solved through the collective action of Americans acting from moral and patriotic interests.

Another solution put forward by high profile African American leaders call for the U.S. government to pay restitution to African Americans for 246 years of slave labor that built America's economy and institutions. Randall Robinson, President of TransAfrica, asserts that the race problem and the challenges facing African Americans cannot be solved until two important matters are addressed. First white Americans must admit that slavery was wrong, acknowledging that it and discrimination have caused

A Discussion of Contemporary Issues Facing African Americans

enduring social and economic hardships for African Americans. Second, the federal government must pay restitution to African Americans (the descendants of African slaves) for unpaid slave labor and resulting damages (Robison, 2000). In one example, Robinson points out that the federal government owes restitution to African Americans because it benefited from slave labor, receiving tax payments from raw cotton that was produced by slaves for which they were never paid (2000, p.206). He also argues that the brutalities against African Americans and decimation of their families have damaged the socio-economic development of this group, making them feel inferior and limiting their opportunities to develop wealth through employment and education.

The argument for restitution or reparation (used interchangeably here) dates back to 1865 when slavery was abolished and the abandoned land of former slave owners' was given to freedmen (freed slaves) in Georgia.[1] These freedmen received 40 acres each for their support of the Union Army and to assist with their economic and social adjustment after slavery (Freeman, 2000). Many freedmen expected a national distribution of land and accruements from the federal government. The land that was given to the freedmen in Georgia was taken back, however, one year after the Civil War (Freeman, 2000).

In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called for reparations in his proposed Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged. This proposal appears in his book *Why We Can't Wait.* Since 1989, Congressmen John Conyers has introduced a bill (H.R. 40) to Congress every year calling for (1) official acknowledgement of the inhumanity of slavery, (2) establishment of a commission to study slavery's impact, and (3) the resulting effects of discrimination on African Americans. This bill is joined by another of its kind introduced this year by Tony Hall from Ohio calling for an apology for slavery and design of a reparation commission. A group of prominent lawyers (Johnnie Cochran, Charles Ogletree, and Richard Scruggs) are planning to file a civil rights lawsuit calling for $1.4 trillion in reparation for African Americans. They plan to use the money to improve schools, build businesses, and heighten the self-esteem of African Americans.

Support for reparation is growing in African American communities and within some local governments. The majority of Americans (58%), however, do not support as much as an apology for slavery; and 81 percent are against reparations (Roe, 2000). Most Americans feel that they should not be held accountable for slavery because they did not participate in it.

There are many challenges facing African Americans: employment, health, economic viability and the legal system. A few of these concerns have been discussed here. It is important to emphasize that these challenges affect the United States as a whole in varying ways. Therefore, the nation may be better served through viewing the

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[1] The First Freedmen's Bureau Act, established by Congress, allowed for the distribution of 40 acres of land to the head of families of freed slaves (Freeman, 2000).

A Discussion of Contemporary Issues Facing African Americans

problems of one group as challenges for the entire Union—*one nation, indivisible with liberty and justice for all.*

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